

Sick Zimbabweans turned away from South African hospitals

CAPE TOWN, South Africa – Sick Zimbabwean refugees in Johannesburg are being turned away from South African hospitals, despite an official policy that outlaws discrimination against noncitizens, a priest said.

Confirming a report by the aid agency Doctors Without Borders that many refugees who are ill or have been raped and injured are being denied access to hospitals or charged exorbitant fees, Mariannhill Father Danisa Khumalo said it is “often people with no refugee or asylum papers who get the worst treatment” when they seek medical help in South Africa.

“It’s a common problem. We have encountered the same stories” as Doctors Without Borders, said Father Khumalo, who coordinates the Johannesburg Archdiocese’s ministry to Zimbabwean refugees. He spoke to Catholic News Service June 4 by telephone.

“Sometimes very sick people are given a date to come back for treatment that is three months away,” he said, noting that staff at some hospitals “say they do not have the resources to treat refugees and that they are already battling” to treat South Africans.

While South African civil society groups have made representations to the city of Johannesburg about refugees being refused treatment at state hospitals and city officials “have reassured them that no one should be turned away, what happens is that a sick refugee’s fate is often at the discretion of the nurse or other hospital staff member he or she encounters first,” Father Khumalo said.

The archdiocese has an office in Braamfontein, a central suburb of Johannesburg, set up to help meet the needs of Zimbabweans who have fled economic collapse at home.

In the last decade, some 3 million Zimbabweans have fled to South Africa because of economic and political turmoil, according to Reuters, the British news agency.

Doctors Without Borders has medical teams working at Johannesburg's Central Methodist Church, which provides shelter to about 3,000 migrants, mostly from Zimbabwe.

Father Khumalo, who visits Central Methodist Church every week, said in an earlier CNS interview that Zimbabweans who come to the Braamfontein office seeking medical help are seen by a doctor, who treats minor ailments and writes referral letters to local hospitals when necessary.

The doctor "tells the people she treats to go and see doctors and nurses she knows will give them the treatment they need," he said, noting that the referrals "open a door that might otherwise stay shut."

Echoing Doctors Without Borders' description of the situation as a failure of the South African government and the United Nations to protect the Zimbabweans, Bishop Kevin Dowling of Rustenburg said it is "the government's responsibility to ensure that its institutions provide their services equally to all."

The BBC reported a spokeswoman for Doctors Without Borders as saying: "Our medical teams see a shocking array of illnesses, and they hear stories from our patients which are quite horrifying." The agency's head of mission in South Africa, Rachel Cohen, said that refugees who go to South African hospitals "are often rejected, they're charged exorbitant fees, they're discharged prematurely, they're treated very poorly by the staff."

Despite a unity government formed in February by Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai and President Robert Mugabe, the influx of Zimbabweans into South Africa has not abated. Doctors Without Borders said lone children are increasingly crossing the border and being abused.

"We are dealing with a humanitarian crisis and as a community we need to respond with care and justice toward our indigent and suffering neighbors," Bishop Dowling, a member of the Solidarity Peace Trust, an ecumenical group of South Africans and Zimbabweans, said in a June 4 telephone interview from Rustenburg.

Providing health care "to all refugees who need it, whether they are political or

economic refugees, should be part of our outreach to them, our sisters and brothers from a neighboring country,” he said, noting that “we will be judged as a nation by what kind of service we give the most vulnerable in our society.”